

Opening Statement of Chairman Greg Walden
Subcommittee on Environment Hearing
“Air Quality Impacts of Wildfires: Mitigation and Management Strategies”
September 13, 2018

(As prepared for delivery)

Today’s hearing focuses on a topic of great concern to Oregonians and those across the West who are experiencing terrible air quality and choking on smoke from wildfires. In my home state of Oregon alone, we’ve already seen over 700 thousand acres destroyed and the fires are still burning.

These fires have left communities in my district blanketed with smoke and with the worst air quality in the world. Medford, Oregon experienced the worst run of “unhealthy” air quality since EPA began recording in 2000.

A leading offender is particulate matter. An article in the New England Journal of Medicine in March pointed out the robust evidence linking exposure to particulate matter to cardiopulmonary mortality and issues with asthma and COPD. According to EPA research, premature deaths tied to wildfire air pollution were as high as 2,500 per year between 2008 and 2012. Other research out of Colorado State University suggest it could be as high as 25,000 people a year.

Making matters worse, it is hard to escape the smoke, even in your own home. Curt in Eagle Point, OR dropped off this air filter from his C-PAP machine. He had to replace it after two days – it is supposed to last two weeks.

Or take this car cabin air filter that was replaced after two months during fire season. A new one looks like this. You begin to realize what people are suffering through.

Nearly three decades of poor management has left our federal forests overstocked with trees and vegetation that fuel increasingly intense fire seasons. Stepping up active forest management practices, such as thinning, prescribed fire, and timber harvests, is one of the best ways to reduce the fuel and the impact of smoke from wildfires.

Sadly, bureaucratic red tape, and obstructionist litigation by special interest groups, has made it difficult to implement these science-based management techniques. And we’re left to choke on the resulting wildfire smoke.

In 2017, the number of fire starts on lands protected by the Oregon Department of Forestry and those on U.S. Forest Service land were split nearly 50/50. The Forest managed lands, however, accounted for over 90 percent of the acres burned. This is partly due to forest management, but also how fires are fought.

As fires are managed, rather than suppressed, and back burned acreages increase, there is a clear impact on air quality and our health. These agencies should do more to take that into account.

As devastating as it is in the summer months, fire can also be a management tool. Prescribed fire after mechanical thinning, can help reduce fuel loads and reduce emissions by up to 75 percent. State Smoke Management Plans set the process for these burns with an aim to protect public health, but also limit the work that gets done. According to Forest Service data, smoke management issues limited between 10 and 20 percent of their prescribed fire projects last year in Oregon. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today on whether these plans properly balance the risk from prescribed fire with the risk of far more intense wildfire.

I also want to thank Senator Herman Baertschiger for joining us from Oregon. Senator Baertschiger is co-chair of the bipartisan fire caucus in Oregon, and has nearly 40 years of experience in wildland fire and forest management. Thank you for your participation and sharing your knowledge with us today.

Just to conclude, I'd like to share a message I received from Jennifer, a mother in Medford. Jennifer said, "As a native Oregonian living in Southern Oregon my entire life I am writing to express my extreme frustration with Oregon's lack of forest management. This is now the third or fourth year that we are hostages in our own homes, that my children are robbed of being able to play outside. I absolutely hate that nothing is done to prevent this from happening."

We are here today to help address the concerns I hear from people like Jennifer and families across my district who have one simple message: something needs to change.